

The CIA and Guatemala

2018/4/95

THE CIA'S four-page public summary of its 700-page secret report on Guatemala clears agency "employees" and "personnel" in the murders of American expatriate Michael DeVine and Efraim Bamaca, guerrilla husband of an American citizen. It goes on to dismiss "reports" of involvement by "persons with whom the CIA had contact" as "seriously flawed." This seems to mean the CIA is denying last spring's allegations that a paid agent in the Guatemalan army had a hand in both deaths. The summary further denies "knowingly" misleading Congress and the State Department: People just "forgot." For these and other errors, the agency's inspector general, who made the study, recommends internal discipline and reform.

All this seems pretty pale. What originally provoked concern, after all, was the horrible possibility that an agency of the U.S. government had carelessly involved itself with a bunch of killers and then covered it up. Those who haven't reviewed the 700-page report are poorly placed to challenge the summary's version. But this version is simply too thin and undocumented to allay those earlier suspicions. The rejoinder is familiar: Intelligence sources and methods must be protected. But the CIA cannot have it both ways: After decades of secret involvement in Guatemala, it

cannot expect to protect its sources and earn public confidence at the same time.

The CIA, of course, understands this very well. The summary offers this lament and confession: "In order to acquire needed intelligence, the Agency was required to establish and maintain very close contacts with a military organization that had a long history of human rights abuses and military personnel who may have engaged in such abuses." Translation: To fight the Cold War, the United States hooked up with some scum. In fact, the agency has updated its list of intelligence tasks in Guatemala to include human rights violations, the country's insurgency and narcotics trafficking. But it still appears to be dealing with some of the same old crowd, this at a moment when Guatemala's own internal peace process offers the best guarantee of shrinking the military to democratic size.

Let there be appropriate discipline and reform, as the CIA's new director, John Deutch, pledges. Let Congress try once again to catch up to the fleet and elusive intended subjects of its CIA oversight. But there must also be a greater disclosure of what happened in the DeVine-Bamaca case and a deeper confrontation of the core issue of whether sufficient reason remains for Americans to work secretly with a corrupt military, in Guatemala or elsewhere.